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ABSTRACT

Inservice training for school administrators is often characterized as sporadic rather than sustained, as topical rather then developmental, and as externally planned rather than internally developed and controlled. There is little evidence to suggest that much of current inservice activity contributes to significant improvement in administrators' knowledge and skill. The present study involved the development and testing of a model for group and individual inservice learning within "a learning community" of administrators in one British Columbia school district. Responses from participants in the initial large-group activity indicated a high level of early satisfaction with the model. The second phase of research is monitoring the progress of small learning groups, formed during the initial learning activity to pursue commonly held learning interests, to determine the effectiveness of the model as perceived by group members and other school district personnel. The present paper reviews the context and background of the project, outlines the approach to and preliminary results of the study, and notes implications for practice in the field of principals' inservice training. (Author/MLF)

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Building Administrator Skill in a Learning Community

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Paper presented at the Australian Education Conference, Perth, Australia, September, 1987.

Abstract

In service training for school administrators is often characterized as sporadic rather than sustained, as topical rather than developmental, and as externally planned rather than internally developed and controlled. There is little evidence to suggest that much of current in service activity contributes to significant improvement in administrators' knowledge and skill. The present study involved the development and testing of a model for group and individual in service learning within "a learning community" of administrators in one British Columbia school district. Responses from participants in the initial large-group activity indicated a high level of early satisfaction with the model. The second phase of research is monitoring the progress of small learning groups formed during the initial learning activity to pursue commonly-held learning interests, to determine the effectiveness of the model as perceived by group members and other school district personnel. The present paper reviews the context and background of the project, outlines the approach to and preliminary results of the study and notes implications for practice in the field of principals in service training.

In recent years, the school principal has been the focus of a sharpened scrutiny by school boards, ministries of education and scholars in educational administration. Several factors may be contributing to the widespread current interest in the preparation, selection and in service training of principals.

Recent findings of the research on school effectiveness which highlight key aspects of the principal's curriculum and instructional leadership role have almost certainly contributed to this interest. It seems reasonable to assert (Leithwood, et al., 1984) that specific aspects and styles of principals' behavior can have a significant effect on the quality of student learning.

A second factor may be the atmosphere created by the financial cutbacks and policies of fiscal restraint experienced in many jurisdictions during the past four to six years. This new set of circumstances has caused school boards to look more closely at the quality of both their personnel and their programs. Services once taken for granted are being reshaped, curtailed and in some cases terminated.

A third factor in some settings may be the potential for turnover in the ranks of principals during the next few years. In British Columbia, for example, the combined effect of recent pension amendment legislation to permit earlier retirement and other legislation removing principals from their historic membership in the teachers' federation may impact the demand for new principals over the next several years.

Juxtaposed against this scene of new knowledge, new financial constraints and legislative change, and related closely to the desire for optimum administrator effectiveness is a wide array of models for and approaches to principals' in service training. Leithwood and Avery (1987), for example, have noted wide variation within a sample of 129 Canadian school districts surveyed regarding school system-based in service programs for principals. Two contributing factors in school systems' programs seem relevant to the scene described above: the desire to optimize the effectiveness of school principals and thus their schools, and the need to ensure maximum return on funds allocated for this purpose.

Traditionally, principals' in service training has tended to be sporadic, often externally planned and imposed and frequently lacking systematic emphasis on the ongoing development of the individual's knowledge and skill in areas established by research as being significant. Involvement is for the most part voluntary and the response of many is minimal participation. There is little evidence to suggest that much of current in service practice has significant positive effects on either principals' performance or their desire for an ongoing program of in service training. Barth (1984) has noted that "most staff development for principals has been something done <u>to</u> principals by others" (p. 93). LaPlant (1979) has suggested that in service education for principals is

> usually topic-specific, oriented toward quick solutions, and based upon a diffusion model which assumes that awareness will lead individuals to apply

> these new understandings in the context of practice. (p. 1)

To date, in this province at least, there have been few examples of ongoing, systematic in service programs based on current knowledge about effective principal behavior and utilizing recent knowledge about staff development and/or the adult learner.

Some recent developments offer positive change in the principals' in service training scene. One such example is the Principals' Center movement in the United States (Barth, 1986). This movement has made a contribution beyond the Centers themselves by identifying criteria of program effectiveness and by outlining programming approaches which may contribute to the development of models for other settings.

One other such setting is the single school district. Principals' Centers are regional and have as a major strength the capacity to maximize the use of costly resources and to provide opportunities for participants to interface with a wide range of colleagues from other jurisdictions. However, the desire to obtain in service training for all principals in a school district, coupled with the inability to fund large-scale out-of-district participation, serve to emphasize the need for local programs. Familiarity with local resources, and the closer personal and working relationships among colleagues in the same district further support the viability of a single-system model.

Background to the Present Study

The context for the study was a British Columbia school district enrolling approximately 13,000 pupils. During the planning stage of the project of which the present study was part, the district was engaged in a search for a superintendent of schools. The new superintendent took office one month before the first major in service activity.

One member of the district staff, a director of instruction, was primarily responsible for facilitating, coordinating and/or arranging in service activities and professional development programs for teachers and administrators. The in service project and the present study resulted from initiatives taken by the district administrator's association. The membership of this group was comprised of 55 principals, vice-principals and other school-based administrators.

The present project and study arose from a request by the administrators' group for assistance in developing a model and designing a program for administrators' in service training. The request included four criteria for the program. First, it would be based in the school district. Second, it would provide opportunities for all administrators to participate on an ongoing basis. Third, the topics of study would be selected and programs and activities designed by the participants. The role of university personnel would be to take a primary role in model development, to lead an initial planning activity and to act as

consultant and advisor to the administrators' group during the first two years of the program.

The Initial Planning Activity

The initial planning activity was a two-day retreat for administrators, held at the same time as a district in-service day for teachers. Forty-seven of the fifty-five potential participants chose to attend the retreat.

The retreat had four stated purposes:

1. To inform administrators about current thought regarding principals' in service training.

2. To identify topics of interest to participants.

3. To form study groups of administrators with similar learning interests.

4. To permit study groups to formulate initial plans for in service activities for the ensuring year.

The latter three purposes rested on the assumption that principals learn best when they are involved in identifying topics and setting agendae for their own learning and when their learning activities and programs are conducted in a supportive setting.

Two issues were of concern to the planning team of the administrators' group. Would the administrators, led only by a process which would identify interests and facilitate group

formation, actually form viable study groups? Would the district provide financial support to enable study groups to carry out in service programs?

Regarding the first issue, the planners established as a criterion for success the voluntary formation of one study group. Such a group, they felt, would serve as a pilot project and would encourage the later formation of other study groups.

The processes of the retreat provided for the identification and grouping of individual learning interests and two opportunities to participate in forming a study group. By the end of the retreat, three study groups with a total membership of 34 of the 47 participants (72% of participants) had been formed.

Concerning the second issue, the administrators' group was aware of a superintendent's discretionary fund which could be accessed for various activities. They were not aware of the criteria for access. During the retreat, the superintendent advised the participants that he would review the status of the fund and establish criteria for access, and that a significant portion would be made available to the administrators' group for in service training.

Research Method

The role of the writer in this action research project was one of participant observation. The writer assisted administrators' group planners in setting out the program, planned and led the retreat and carried out subsequent interviews

with leaders of the study groups and with the director of instruction responsible for professional development.

The first follow-up interviews were held approximately four months after the planning retreat. The researcher asked five clusters of questions intended to gather basic data about the current level of group activity, the number and involvement of participants, group plans, group leaders' assessment of progress to date and whether the process had developed in ways not anticipated at the outset.

Findings

One major intervening factor affected the rate of progress of all groups. The introduction by the provincial government of legislation opposed by the provincial teachers federation led to job action in the form of a work-to-rule "instruction only" campaign by teachers. While in service activities arranged by teachers or administrators themselves were exempted from the job action, the attention of most administrators was on the issues at hand and the climate in the schools more than on their own professional development.

Despite this significant factor, the leaders of all groups expressed satisfaction with progress to date, reported specific meeting times and topics of study and were able to articulate their group's plans for the coming months. Meeting times varied among groups on the basis of group members' personal schedules. One group leader reported that group members were enjoying the

collegial learning atmosphere, had a "sense of service," showed strong enthusiasm and displayed "on-task" behavior. The same leader noted "an excellent mixture of learning styles and personalities."

The teachers' job action campaign began in the spring of 1987. All three study group leaders reported definite plans to resume learning activities in the fall. All groups were working on self-selected topics, with no apparent influence by the district on topic selection.

Three unanticipated outcomes were noted. The director of instruction referred to above had begun a district B.A.S.I.C. (Building Administrator Skill in a Learning Community) newsletter to keep all administrators informed of group progress and activities. A fourth study group, which had formed during the planning retreat but decided not to continue, was now planning to commence activity and invite other administrators not involved in a group to join. Finally, the administrators' group received, on the basis of work done to date, a modest grant from the provincial Ministry of Education to support further development of the B.A.S.I.C. project.

Discussion of the Findings

It seems reasonable to conclude on the basis of the findings that the selection of the single school district was a reasonable course of action. The self-initiated nature of the groups and their learning topics required for support the existence of

strong, collegial interpersonal relations, particularly when the unusual political situation developed.

The district, by making a district staff member's time and expertise available, and particularly by offering assurance of immediate funding, played a significant role in strengthening initial interest. The superintendent evidenced personal support by leading, on request, a group's learning activity which matched an area of his expertise.

At this early stage, and despite intervening problems, the administrators appear to have established that they have both the interest and the ability to plan and carry out programs of learning activities related to their own identified interests.

To this point, the research interest has been in process more than substance. The second phase of research will examine the nature of the study topics selected, learning activities employed and perceived gains in knowledge and skill.

Implications for Further Research

As noted above, the initial research focus was on the preliminary testing and validation of assumptions that principles of adult learning and in service training could be applied successfully to a project directed almost solely by the learners themselves. That appears to have been the case.

An inherent danger exists that the project's greatest strength to date - its self-directing nature - may prove, if

subsequent action continues in linear fashion, to be a significant weakness. Leithwood et al. (1984) have asserted that

> The major weakness of existing programs is the questionable contribution made to the principals' school improvement abilities by the outcomes they strive to achieve. Encompassed by this criticism are programs in which such outcomes have not been convincingly linked to school improvement; depend primarily on the expressed needs of participants; are entirely "issues dependent," not addressing the principals' roles in the issue; and/or do not recognize the scope of the principals' job as a whole. (p. 51)

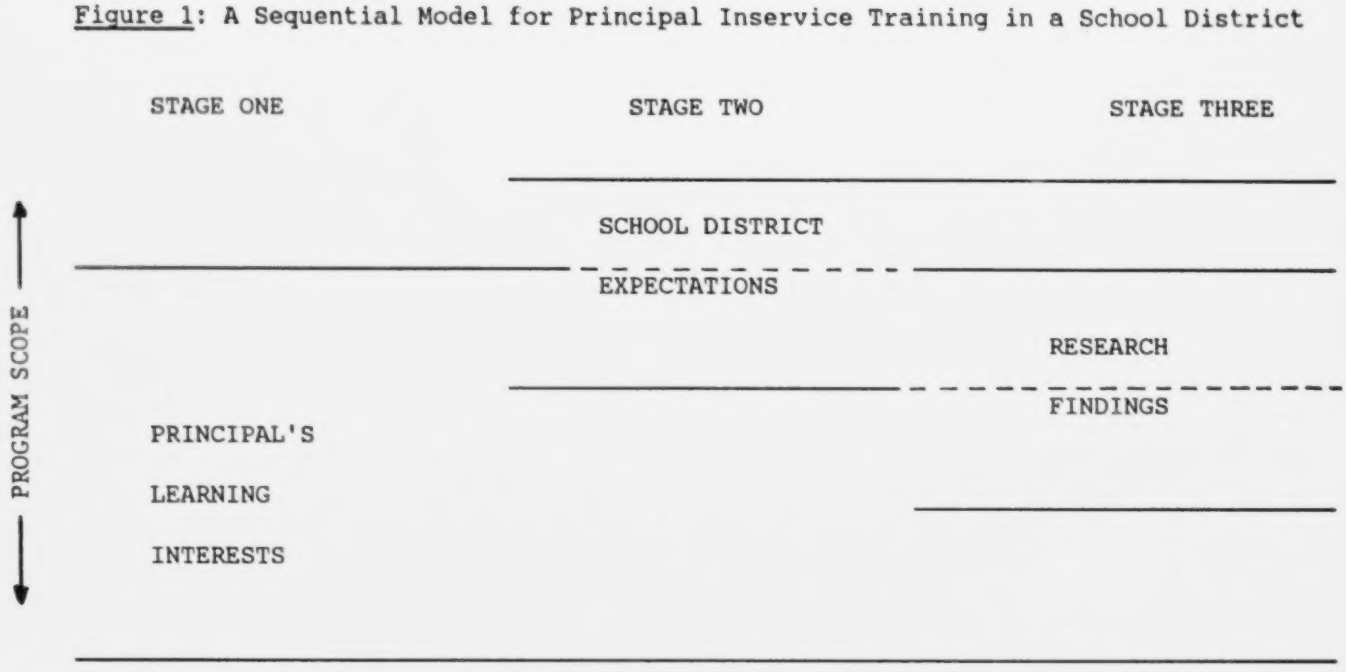
Yet a dichotomy remains. Barth (1986) has observed that

> Principals have built up antibodies to attempts by others to remediate them. They resist fiercely, if covertly, a deficiency model of staff development which says, "Here's what I expect of you," and asks, "How well are you doing it?" Many attend, few succumb, fewer learn. (p. 156)

If in fact there exists the beginnings of a body of substantive knowledge about important student learning outcomes-related knowledge and behaviors for principals (and recent research would suggest that is the case), then a "marriage" of essential knowlege and skill with principals' self-directed learning seems necessary.

Perhaps viable programs can be developed using a sequential model (Figure 1). Moving from a Stage One base of individual interests on the basis of the criteria cited, district priorities and expectations for principals (Stage Two) might be introduced. In Stage Three, current research findings might be explicitly introduced into program structure and content.

Figure 1: A Sequential Model for Principal Inservice Training in a School District



CRITERIA FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

STAGE ONE TO STAGE TWO ⟶ STAGE TWO TO STAGE THREE

- confidence of participants in ability to manage programs
- satsifaction of participants with initial results
- provision of second-stage (or ongoing) funding by school district
- desire of participants for program expansion
- existence of district expectations for principals: competence and ongoing development

- attainment by participants of some or all of district expectations which can be linked to inservice training experiences.
- long-term, Board policy-level commitment to continued funding and and other support
- interest by a significant number of particpants in gaining research-based knowledge and skills
- acceptance of in-service training as a regularity of the principalship

It should be noted that the sequential, "overlapping" features of this model provide for the retention of a significant component of principals' own interests. Elements of all three components would, of course, exist throughout the sequence. District priorities and expectations and the influence of current research findings model move into greater prominence, albeit not at the cost of principals' self-direction. To sacrifice the latter component will result in a return to practice resembling and carrying the problems of much of current in service practice.

Further research into the present project and others may serve to clarify and make more explicit this basic model. In particular, the nature of the three stages and the evidential criteria for movement require further consideration.

Implications for Practice

The primary implications for practice concern school districts. The single school district, because of its employment relationship with principals, is a key agent in the nature, focus and delivery of in service programs. Its role is crucial throughout all three stages of the in-district program. The Stage One learning interests of principals require both the encouragement and the support of senior school district staff, particularly the superintendent of schools. Any in service program, no matter how modest, is costly in terms of both time and money. Support and direction in the commitment of principals' time, and tangible financial support on an ongoing basis, are fundamental to program success.

For a district to facilitate movement to Stages Two and Three, an informed set of expectations for the principal are necessary. It may be difficult, in terms of both time and access to information for the individual principal to develop a valid, research-based conception of the job. It seems almost certain to have less value for the system than for the district to develop and articulate a conception of and a set of expectations for the principalship.

Conclusion

That the nature and quality of in service training for school principals varies widely seems not to be in dispute. That the key parties involved are anxious to improve this situation is clear. Knowledge about adult education, in service training and the effective principal is growing in breadth and in acceptance of its validity. There is reason for optimism that significant gains in program quality can be made through continued research and thoughtful, reflective practice.

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